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U.S. ASKED BRUNEI TO ASSIST CONTRAS

Officials Say Oil Nation Gave Millions to Swiss Account

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 6 — Brunei, an oil-rich Southeast Asian nation, agreed to a State Department request earlier this year to aid the Nicaraguan rebels, Administration officials said today, contributing several million dollars to a secret Swiss bank account run by Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North.

The State Department would not officially confirm the transfer of funds or its role in the matter. But Administration officials said that the request to Brunei's ruler, Sultan Hassanah Bolkiyah, was initiated by Elliott Abrams, Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs, and had the approval of Secretary of State George P. Shultz.

Mr. Abrams in a telephone interview said "No comment" when asked about his role.

Use of the Money Unclear

Administration officials said that the State Department's role was legal. They said a Congressional conference report in 1985, accompanying Congress's approval of \$27 million in humanitarian aid to the Nicaraguan rebels, known as the contras, had authorized the department to solicit other humanitarian donations from foreign governments.

But Administration officials conceded today that once the Sultan made his contribution, said to be less than \$10 million, there was no way for the State Department to know whether it was being used for humanitarian aid or military assistance.

The fact that the money was provided to a Swiss bank account managed by Colonel North, the National Security Council aide who was dismissed last week for his role in diverting Iranian payments for arms to the contra account, strongly suggested that the Brunei money may have been spent on military equipment for the contras, officials acknowledged. At that time, funds from outside donors were used almost exclusively for that purpose.

Congress in 1985 had ruled out any military assistance to the contras. This year, it changed its mind and agreed to \$100 million in aid to the contras, of which \$70 million was in military assistance.

According to Administration officials, once the Sultan agreed to aid the contras, he asked the State Department where to send his money. Mr. Abrams, who reportedly originated the idea of seeking funds from Brunei, asked Colonel North. Colonel North then gave him a number for a Swiss bank account.

Administration officials said the Brunei government subsequently informed the State Department that it had made a contribution, but that the department did not have any way of monitoring the funds.

'A Wink, And a Nod'

Senator Patrick Leahy, Democrat of Vermont and vice chairman of the Intelligence Committee, said: "I've said all along that while our Government may not have been clearly breaking the law, with regard to the contras, they were doing a lot with a wink and a nod. This sounds like a wink, and a nod, and a clap and a cheer all put together."

The \$27 million in nonmilitary aid approved by Congress was disbursed by a special State Department office set up in August 1985. Department officials have insisted that those funds were handled legally, although it has now become known that aircraft hired by the department to deliver the nonmilitary aid to the contras were also chartered by outside groups providing the Contrats with military aid.

The planes would fly to Central America at State Department expense, make their delivery of humanitarian aid, and then be hired by the outside group to deliver arms.

No explanation was provided today by the State Department on why any outside contributions from foreign governments for humanitarian aid were not put into special accounts that the department could monitor.

Papre Cites Shultz Role

The Los Angeles Times, which reported some details of the Brunei contribution today, said that Mr. Shultz had personally persuaded the Sultan to give the money during a trip to that small nation on the northwest side of the island of Borneo.

But Administration officials denied

that Mr. Shultz, during his 50-minute meeting with the Sultan, had raised the question of the money for the contras. They said the request was made through normal diplomatic channels.

Mr. Shultz visited Brunei last June on his way to the annual meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, in Manila. The reason he gave at the time for stopping there was that it was the only member nation of that association he had not visited.

In briefing reporters aboard Mr. Shultz's plane, an aide said that the Sultan had asked nothing of the United States and Mr. Shultz had asked nothing of him.

Sultan Opposed to Communism

Administration officials said Brunei was solicited by the State Department because the Sultan was known to be staunchly anti-Communist and was described in the Guinness Book of World Records as the richest man in the world. He received Mr. Shultz in his air-conditioned palace, said to have cost \$400 million, and consisting of 1,788 rooms. The per capita income of

Brunei is about \$18,000.

Brunei is the first foreign nation confirmed to have contributed funds to the contras voluntarily. There have been widespread reports that Saudi Arabia also provided funds to the contras.

According to Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d, as much as \$30 million paid by Iran for arms secretly purchased from the United States was diverted by Israel to the contra bank account. Israel, which helped arrange shipments of weapons to Iran on behalf of the Reagan Administration, has denied any involvement in sending money to the contras.

The State Department and Mr. Shultz had both strongly supported aiding the contras. But the department has insisted that it never solicited funds for military aid during the period Congress opposed such aid.

Mr. Shultz is to testify on the Iran operation before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on Monday, and questions about the outside financing of the contras are likely to arise, State Department officials said.